VISIT…

Three Forgotten French Filmmakers: André Cayatte, Georges Rouquier, and Roger Leenhardt

by André Bazin, translated by Bert Cardullo

These three review-essays by André Bazin were originally published in French in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Each treats a neglected, if not forgotten, director together with his most important film: respectively, André Cayatte and Before the Deluge; *Georges Rouquier and* Farrebique; *and Roger Leenhardt and* The Last Vacation.

The Cybernetics of André Cayatte

The real value of independent criticism does not lie in its imperviousness to expedient compromise, as the cliché would have it, because it has been ages since critics received bribes under their napkins at restaurants, and the most favorable review these days would not even get you the virtue of a starlet in return. No, in truth, the critic needs to make very few efforts to be honest. Temptation lies elsewhere—in judging works on the basis of the merit of their intentions, the nobility of their ambition, or the stupidity of their detractors—and in the final analysis we should judge films solely on the basis of the aesthetic principles they bring into play. Although I do not at all like having serious reservations about a body of work that is worthy in many respects and that has been created by an intelligent and courageous filmmaker, I must nonetheless disavow the films of André Cayatte.

The auteur of *Before the Deluge* (1954) introduced into French cinema a new kind of social film, which has imposed itself with such force that it has inspired numerous mutations in more or less attenuated or exaggerated form. There is no denying that *Justice Is Done* (1950) and *We Are All Murderers* (1952) have changed the course of French cinematic production and that we find echoes of them, for instance, in *The Slave* (1953, Yves Ciampi), *The Healer* (1954, Yves Ciampi), and *The Rage to the Body* (1954, Ralph Habib), to mention only the most worthy films they have influenced. In the meantime, what we would call the *Adorable Creatures* (1952, Christian-Jaque) syndrome has been developing as well, and it has been gaining in popularity over the last three years.[1]

Film critic, founder of the influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and spiritual father of the French New Wave, André Bazin (1918–1958) almost single-handedly established the study of movies as an intellectual pursuit.

Bert Cardullo is professor of theater and drama at the University of Michigan and the regular film critic for the *Hudson Review*. He is the coeditor of *Playing to the Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft* (Yale University Press, 1998) and *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology* (Yale University Press, forthcoming).

© 2002 *by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819*

Figure 1. Film critic, founder of the influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and spiritual father of the French New Wave, André Bazin (1918–1958) almost single-handedly established the study of movies as an accepted intellectual pursuit. Courtesy Janine Bazin.

I understand very well the easy paradox of placing the "social courage" of André Cayatte and the amiable cynicism of Christian-Jaque and company on the same level, with the screenwriter Charles Spaak pulling the strings for both men. I refuse to place these directors on the same level, however—not only for moral

reasons and because experience has sufficiently proved who took all the risks, but also, and most sincerely, for the sake of cinema. There is a lot to say against the artistic principle behind Cayatte's films, and I shall not refrain from saying it later, but only after I have acknowledged the qualities of his work, which could too easily be ignored if I gave an a priori, restrictive definition of the art of directing. Form and content, art and morality, are not as dissociable here as the genre of Cayatte's socially conscious films seems to indicate. Although *Before the Deluge* has provoked much hatred and indignation, and although it is still the target of extremely cunning maneuvers by the pharisees, it would be wrong to think it owes such a response only to its social, moral, or political implications as such. These elicited many objections only because of the exceptional efficiency of the film's mise-en-scène.

This film moves the viewer; it shakes him [or her], putting him [or her] in a state of violent and strange uneasiness. Indifference to it is impossible. That Luis Buñuel liked *Before the Deluge*, although nothing in the film appears to lend itself to the secret meandering of dreams, is not that surprising. I do not think I am espousing the vision of surrealist critics if I defend Cayatte from this point of view, for it seems to me that here lies his strongest alibi. By this I mean that I discern in *Before the Deluge*, just as in *We Are All Murderers*, I-don't-know-what sort of logical atrocity, cruelty through abstraction, or terrorism in the linking or intellectual clarity of the facts, all of which give the work the traumatizing characteristics of a nightmare whose particulars we try to make fade away by blinking our eyes. Cayatte has transposed judicial rhetoric to filmic images under the guise of realism. But, as we shall see, facts, people, and events are not ideas. By presenting them as such, Cayatte distorts reality, substituting for it an exclusively logical universe peopled with beings made in our image but who are also radically different from us because they are deprived of any ambiguity; this universe is irrefutable, however, because its physical evidence conceals a logical organization by which the viewer's mind is trapped without hope of escape.

In this respect, *Before the Deluge* is superior to *We Are All Murderers*. The latter film certainly is convincing; one leaves the movie theater horrified yet persuaded of the absurd monstrosity of the death penalty. And in its certainty, the viewer's shaken conscience ultimately finds a kind of rest. But *Before the Deluge* does not even offer such a refuge. Its logic is as open as the thread of an endless screw. If these adolescents are innocent, then their parents are guilty. Each of them embodies a different method of childrearing together with a maximum of paternal or maternal benevolence, which itself varies from social type to social type. It follows that their guilt is not only unconscious but also contradictory, because to be a parent means that one is always guilty. The force of this film, which is out to prove something, is that it does not prove anything at all. It ultimately abandons us in the hell of its logic, where we are terrified by the prospects it leaves open.

My argument is perhaps a little paradoxical; I admit that I am pushing it a little too far. *Before the Deluge* is not a monument to logical delirium, but I think I am right when I look for its true cinematic qualities in a certain representation of judicial rhetoric. This representation is artificial, and its indisputable efficiency

derives from the uneasiness we are made to feel by the internal contradiction between the logic of its discourse and the illegitimacy of its concrete realization. I am guessing that André Cayatte does not care much about being defended in such a way. I do not want him to think, however, that I am making fun of him, or that I am giving ground to the detractors of his film (I mean those who dismiss it for moral reasons), first because these detractors—representatives from the MRP[2] or the mayor's office—would not understand my reasoning in the least, but above all because I believe in the value of Cayatte's films, even after what I have just said. The arguments of these films, like all arguments, are not indisputable, but their purely intellectual cogency is less important for my purposes than the efficiency of their cinematic form.

Cayatte creates a shock in the narcotized mass of people whose sensitivity has otherwise been numbed by the popular cinema, a shock whose novelty alone would already deserve our consideration. In between the narrative (purely dramatic or novelistic) film and the propaganda film (in the good sense of the word, in the style of, say, *The Battleship Potemkin* [1925, Sergei Eisenstein]), which are both based on the identification of the viewer with the hero (in the two senses of the word)—that is to say, on the viewer's intellectual passivity—Cayatte introduces a rather new cinematic phenomenon. He justifies his movie on the grounds that it triggers the mechanisms of reasoning in the viewer. His are not simply films with ideas, or with a thesis (these would not be new); they are instead rather paradoxical endeavors in which the usual psychological mechanisms of film boomerang in a way, hurling themselves back toward the viewer only to set, little by little, his [or her] rational faculty in motion in synchronization with the script and the mise-en-scène.

Eisenstein used images and montage to provoke an emotional response, and he used emotion to make the viewer accept his ideas. After seeing his films, one is indeed enthusiastic and convinced (i.e., in a state completely different from the intellectual anxiety in which Cayatte leaves us). At the end of a traditional film, we feel vaguely inhabited for a more or less long time by the characters. The universe of the film is in us or we are in it; this is a state of mind and emotion that is at the same time passive and passionate. After seeing *Before the Deluge*, even the dumbest of viewers has become by force if not more intelligent, then at least more logical. Once the film has launched in each of its viewers the ship of reason, however, the movement of its intellectual mass progressively subsides, although it continues for a while to chart its course in the waters of our mind. I do not see any reason such a result cannot be considered one of the effects of art. To be sure, Cayatte's mise-en-scène has only a few of the qualities that we generally appreciate: it lacks feeling (how could it be otherwise?) and sometimes taste, and the actors are seldom well directed. But it must have qualities, among which I would number force and clarity—for without them, how could the film achieve such an efficiency? One can also infer the qualities of Cayatte's films from the fact that his imitators are always far less convincing than he is, even though they are sometimes more skillful.

And yet I must in a way expose this kind of filmmaking (at the same time I defend it against the majority of its enemies) because of the misconception it introduces into the filmic spectacle. Cayatte has invented a genre, but it is a false genre

Figure 2. A courtroom scene from *Justice Is Done* (André Cayatte, 1950). Courtesy La Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels.

or, more accurately, an equivocal one that betrays at once the realism of cinema and its powers of abstraction, which are dialectically connected. I know what Cayatte is going to say in his own defense, and I am not insensitive to the surprise and sadness he may feel when he sees that I am not totally on his side. I am surprised myself; in fact, I had for a while mistaken the heat of my indignation at the stupidity or the hypocrisy of his enemies to approve of his film aesthetically. On second thought, and after a second viewing of the film, I do not approve anymore. And I have to admit to André Cayatte that his arguments only confirm my reservations.

Let me refute his most immediate criticism first. At Cannes, Cayatte and Spaak did their best to refute a typical opinion, that *Before the Deluge* is a "film with a thesis" and "the work of a lawyer." "Of course," Cayatte said, "I used to be a lawyer, but more than anything else I used to be a journalist, and I was once even a locomotive engineer, so why wouldn't I also make locomotive engineers' films? But because *Justice Is Done* was about a trial, someone has determined once and for all that I am a maker of legalistic films, built like pleas and out to demonstrate a thesis." If you had your doubts whether Cayatte has remained a lawyer, listening to him defending his films would be enough to convince you. Yet his plea has the same weakness as his film: its arguments are too convincing to be true. "I know," he said,

> where my mistake lies: I was wrong to seize on a trial as an excuse to tell a story. It was a convenient narrative device that enabled me to avoid repetition. Obsessed with my professional past, the critics have seen in it only another lawyer's plot. They have thought that my intention was to acquit the children and to put the parents in front of an

audience-as-jury. But I have removed the voiceover that came before the flashbacks and that could have suggested that I was putting somebody on trial, as a few people familiar with my work happened to think. Now there is simply a story that cannot be identified in good faith with the trial that is used here only as a means to tell it.[3]

I am not the only one who saw the film in its new version and did not think Cayatte's cuts were significant. But Cayatte believes, or pretends to believe, that his film looks like a trial only because of the trial it contains. Whether or not the movie explicitly accuses the parents is not the heart of the matter, however, for it is the taut nature or interlocking structure of the script at all moments of the action that is highly suspicious here. What characterizes *Before the Deluge*, as well as the two previous films (*Justice Is Done* and *We Are All Murderers*), despite the distinctions Cayatte wants to make, is that the characters and their actions are all completely driven by motivations that are individually clear as far as the movie's form goes but are socially determined where its content is concerned. People and their behavior are the product of a quadrilateral of forces whose longer side is the time period, the society, and the environment, plus the historical circumstances, and whose shorter side is the kind of family upbringing they have had. So the parents themselves, who are the only physical embodiment of this upbringing, could not be anything but the product of their era, their environment, and their upbringing. And so on, ad infinitum, like the reproduction of identical images in a hall of mirrors.

One is also reminded here of all those modern clocks with a glass case on the back as well as the front, so that the sight of the movement of the clock's components becomes even more important than the telling of the time. Despite Cayatte's subtle distinctions, the only difference I see among a "film with a thesis," like *Justice Is Done*, a "filmed thesis," like *We Are All Murderers*, and a "story," like *Before the Deluge*, is that somebody has removed the handles from the last clock. But the fact that it does not give us the time anymore does not change anything about the mechanism; its function is still to reduce reality to an intelligible and unmysterious organization, which is set in motion by the spring of logic and given a regular rhythm by the pendulum swinging back and forth between the pros and cons of the argument in question.

The argument that has puzzled me most in Cayatte's defense (although he is ignoring it these days in his own defense of *Before the Deluge*) is that since *We Are All Murderers* was a "filmed thesis," critics who advocate novelty and formal freedom of expression in film should be in favor of this movie's extension of traditional narrative methods. To be sure, in the past I accepted Jacques Feyder's theory that René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* could be put into filmic form. It is also true that Cayatte's films are absolutely Cartesian. But what is the point here? To reason in film? To come up with a series of abstract ideas based no longer on words but on the irrefutable replica of reality that we find in motion pictures? We know that this can be a legitimate and feasible goal, as it is the principle on which numerous newsreels are based. I am not reproaching Cayatte for his ends in this regard but for his deceptive means. By building a film like a story, he implicitly commits himself, in the viewer's behalf, to a respect for the laws of fictional reality. These characters exist and

we must believe in them, just as we believe in our fellow human beings. Yet what distinguishes reality from abstraction, the event from the idea, the credible character from a mere psychological equation, is the mystery and ambiguity therein that resist any attempt at analysis. The only true fiction hero is in a way more than what he is. But because of their intentions, Cayatte and Spaak need a very different reality, a reality "without rest," that is exactly divisible by its initial ideas, for which reality is only the pretext. Once again, it is legitimate and even recommended to use realism on screen to advance pure ideas, but only if one has first broken up reality and selected fragments from it.

Consider, for instance, a scene from the famous series *Why We Fight* showing newsreel footage of an Allied offensive moving from left to right—a scene that is joined to a voiceover text signifying a triumphant attack, whatever the real circumstance of the filming might have been.[4] The abstraction here lies in the editing and in the relationship between the pictures and the text. In other words, abstraction is legitimate in films only in the narrative modes that designate it as such. By claiming the innocence or guilelessness of his "story," Cayatte condemns himself to an internal contradiction that is also, I must admit, the heart of his films' efficiency and, to a large extent, their paradoxical charm. In a time when critics love to make the phenomenological description of objective, physical reality a criterion of filmic value, André Cayatte gives us a judicial universe that is mechanical and peopled with automatons. We may now await the revolt of the robots.

Notes

Bazin first published this article in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 36 (June 1954): 22–27. It was later included in volume 3 (*Cinéma et sociologie*) of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958–1962), 169–76. The essay is translated here, for the first time, with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin. All notes have been provided by the translator/editor.

1. In *Adorable Creatures*, a Paris fashion executive remembers his past love affairs with four very lovely but very different women. This lightweight quartet of sex sketches, played with some class by Daniel Gélin, Danielle Darrieux, and several others, provided the naughtiness lacking in English and American products at the time. Yet Gélin still ends up with a "good" girl. The script was by Charles Spaak, who wrote the screenplays for Cayatte's *Justice Is Done* and *We Are All Murderers*, in addition to writing films for Jacques Feyder, Jean Renoir, and Julien Duvivier.
2. The MRP was a conservative political party in France.
3. André Cayatte, public talk at Cannes Film Festival, 1954.
4. See Bazin's article on the *Why We Fight* series in Bert Cardullo, *Bazin at Work* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187–92.

Farrebique, or the Paradox of Realism

The extreme yet commendable bias of the supporters of *Farrebique* (1947), on the one hand, and the bad faith of Henri Jeanson and the few "anti-Farrebiquians" who took a polemical stance in the press, on the other, at bottom conceal a variety of intermediate opinions, which are far more measured for being expressed in

private. Aside from two or three stupid judgments about the banality of *Farrebique*'s realism, everybody agrees that the film is of exceptional quality. People differ only in their estimation of the relative importance of some weaknesses in a work that is not absolutely perfect. One could reproach it, for instance, for partly betraying its documentary function, since it neglects the economic relations between the farm and the village.

The "poetic" aspect of the film may also elicit diverse reactions. This aspect is to my thinking the most objectionable, although certain elements, like the depiction of winter, work quite well. The same goes for the burial, which should undoubtedly be entered in the anthology of great screen burials. However, the directorial interpretations, the poetic transpositions Georges Rouquier made at several moments in the film, provoke my negative judgment—a judgment that the essential elements of the film escape. One must clearly distinguish in *Farrebique* between what pertains to the poet's personal sensibility (however more or less reliable his taste) and what pertains to the very essence of the work, to the initial and ultimate revelation of its profound originality. I hasten to add here that I consider Rouquier a poet and that the purely logical distinction I am making is not aimed at minimizing everything that *Farrebique* owes to its creator's sensibility. I simply think it is important not to confuse arguably objectionable qualities with an objectively inarguable breakthrough from which the cinema can benefit in all its genres, not only the pastoral one.

One could almost say that the value of *Farrebique* is less aesthetic than moral. To bring this venture to a good conclusion, Rouquier needed more than mere courage; he had to use all his willpower to remain true to his initial intention. *Farrebique* is an ascetic enterprise whose purpose is to deprive reality of all that has nothing to do with it, especially the parasitism of art. More imagination and perseverance than one generally suspects were needed to discover the rules of the game and to stick to them without flinching. The risk was worthwhile, but some will say (or, alas, have already written!) that Rouquier should not have taken so much trouble if it was just to go back to the starting point. "For one-and-a-half hours I saw cows defecate, peasants eat, rain fall, mud stick to clogs," Jean Fayard writes.[1] According to M. Fayard, events of so little significance are unworthy in themselves of appearing in a cinematic work. M. Fayard thinks that it would be simpler just to go to the countryside or, generally speaking, that he does not need to go to the movies to see things as they are.

Before responding to this criticism, I would like to observe that the cinema has never ceased to pretend that it shows things as they are. "At the movies," says an old peasant woman in Jules Renard's *Diary* (*Journal*, 1887–1910),[2] "you always believe that what you see is real." Except for a few films in which the filmmakers have systematically tried to elude the realism of the scenery, the essence of the artistic efficacy of the cinema, even when a film is set in a fantasy or fairy-tale world, has always been founded on material verisimilitude. The technical objective of photography finds its natural extension in the aesthetic objectivity of the cinema. It is for this reason that the history of set design, after the heresy of expressionism, has for the last thirty years been showing a consistent return to realism. Marcel Carné did not ask his designer, Alexander Trauner, to build a fantasy Barbès-Rochechouart

subway station for *Gates of the Night* (1946); not one bar is missing from the gates of this metro. The role of the set designer in modem cinema is to imagine the set that would be most credible within the framework of the screenplay. This set must of course contribute as much as possible to the drama, but above all it has to give maximum believability to the plot. Jean Gabin's bedroom in *Daybreak* (1939, Marcel Carné) is thus the epitome of documentary precision in its representation of the dwelling of a working-class bachelor living in a suburb of Paris.

So let us not reproach *Farrebique* for its realism, or else we had better address our reproaches to the entire film industry. If the "anti-Farrebiquians" now object that the realism of cinema in general achieves the status of art only insofar as it is artificial, calculated, constructed, and selected, not for itself but as one element of the work of art to which it contributes, then I would make another observation. Are my opponents so sure that this subordination to the aesthetic design (dramatic or otherwise) governing a work of art has not slowly altered our very sense of reality in the cinema? There is no lack of so-called realistic films about insignificant events or slices of life. There is no lack of peasant movies, either. Why then is *Farrebique* labeled as the ugly duckling among them? In my opinion, this is due to Rouquier's genius, to his ability, if you will, to stand an egg on one end. He has understood that verisimilitude has slowly taken the place of truth, that reality has slowly dissolved into realism. So he painfully undertook to rediscover reality, to return it to the light of day, to retrieve it naked from the drowning pool of art.

Some people reproach *Farrebique* for its ugliness. The men and the women in it are not very good-looking. The Rouergue landscape is without grandeur.[3] The houses are dirty and styleless. The village square, which we discover on a Sunday morning before and after mass, is depressingly commonplace. In France, we have plenty of villages whose historical and geographical picturesqueness would have provided an intrinsic beauty to justify the documentary interest in Rouquier's film. Henri Jeanson takes a moralistic and patriotic stance to deplore the image that *Farrebique* will give abroad of French peasant life: "They live like animals, without any hygiene. They express themselves in bad French."[4] (Jeanson probably means dialect here.) But, clearly, Rouquier could not have brought his project to a successful end with material whose beauty would have distorted in some way the chemical reaction of the camera. A beautiful landscape, a little Romanesque church, or some entertaining folklore would have diverted us from nature, from the village itself, from the gathering of young men whose fun and games are limited to being half drunk on Sunday nights in some filthy barroom. Deprived of horror on the one hand and local color on the other, Rouquier's reality is situated in a neutral zone that only minimally solicits our wonder or our pity. This reality is nothing but itself, the very kind of reality about which the artist has nothing to say. And yet Rouquier decided to focus his attention on it and it alone; his camera performs a mysterious and paradoxical photographic operation at the end of which all we are left with is the consciousness of this reality.

At this point I must talk about the audience, which you would think would be as bored with the film as Henri Jeanson was. I confess that, after two private screenings of *Farrebique*, I feared, despite all my admiration for the film, that the public would

be bored. I even believe that Rouquier himself was not too sure that it would not be bored. I had to see the film among viewers who were required to pay for their seats (and who were no millionaires) to realize that, although it had no story and no star, the movie exhibited an almost demagogic charm and that the audience was deeply attuned to the pleasure of simply recognizing things. We have seen the countryside a thousand times in the cinema, but in these instances it was used as a backdrop for the actors or as a pretext for displaying the skill of the cinematographer. Snow, when it was not made of boric acid, served exclusively as a pictorial or dramatic element (see *The Pastoral Symphony* [1946, Jean Delannoy]), and the sheep wore the imaginary ribbons of the plot around their necks.[5] In *Farrebique*, by contrast, reality is never completely subordinate to the story or to art; indeed, reality exists above all for itself. In the magnificent poem of winter, Rouquier's editing never elevates things to the level of abstract symbolism. (I have to say here that he is less successful in the spring sequence.) The frosted telegraph wires, the dog running in the snow, and the ice in the rut cracked by the man's clog are mere facts, no doubt trite and multiple but not at all general; Rouquier preserves their total singularity.

Consider, for instance, the fire in the hearth. There is no want of these in the cinema, and some have been better photographed than this one. In *It Happened at the Inn* (1943, Jacques Becker), the emperor pokes burning logs just as the grandfather does in *Farrebique*. Only the grandfather's fire is a real fire whose flames rise on their own and not on command from a special-effects person, which everyone knows because the logs are still green and huff and puff as they bleed their sap. Does anyone who sat around such fires in childhood dare deny that for the first time on screen he [or she] recognizes in this scene the peculiar and vast mystery of flames and wood? John Q. Public in any case is not to be fooled. He recognizes the mud puddle in the sunken lane that soils the shoes of the brother-in-law, who has come from the city on a farm holiday; he recognizes the aunt, the dealer in notions, the postal clerk in this little village in the center or southwest of France where his parents were born; he recognizes the fairground with its linden trees and its sparse, yellowish grass; he recognizes all the experiences he could have had if he had been born a peasant one or two generations earlier. He recognizes this slightly ridiculous and nostalgic world, which he vaguely feels he has somehow betrayed, the world of the land, of men and animals, which he dimly remembers from his childhood and from holidays past.

There is no story here, or very little, and there are no stars, no actors: only a reality that everyone, in the secrecy of his good or bad conscience, personally recognizes. "Look," shouted the first viewers of the Lumière cinematograph as they pointed at the leaves on the trees, "look, they're moving." The cinema has come a long way since the heroic days when crowds were satisfied with the rough rendition of a branch quivering in the wind! And yet, after fifty years of cinematic realism and tremendous technical advances, nothing less than a little bit of genius was needed to give back to the public the simple and elementary joy that the fictionalized and dramatized cinema was no longer providing: that of recognition.

This is why, in spite of its shortcomings, of a certain paradoxical aestheticism that is a little obsolete, a few slightly awkward moments in the narrative, and an

Figure 3. In *Farrebique* (Georges Rouquier, 1947), reality is never completely subordinate to the story or to art; reality exists above all for itself. The fire in the hearth is a real fire whose flames rise on their own and not on command from a special-effects person. Courtesy La Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels.

uneven though indisputable poetic sense, I consider *Farrebique* a major achievement. It is one of the very few French films that, together with André Malraux's *Man's Hope* (1939), shows us that the cinema is in bad need of a realistic revolution. This revolution just broke out in Italy, and the Italian filmmakers have done

so much with it in less than two years that I fear their films may already constitute the classics of the neorealistic movement.

Notes

This article was first published in *Esprit* 15, no. 128 (1947): 676–80. It is translated here, for the first time, with the permission of Janine Bazin. All notes have been provided by the translator/editor.

1. Jean Fayard (1902–1978) was an editor, journalist, and author who wrote for a number of publications, most notably *Candide* and *Le Figaro*. His *Mal d'amour* won the Prix Goncourt in 1931.
2. Jules Renard (1864–1910) was a French writer of fiction and drama whose bitter, realistic attitude toward life found expression in terse, relentless studies of character and situation.
3. In the past, Rouergue was a country south of the kingdom of France. Annexed by King Henri IV in 1607, it is now the Département of Aveyron, with Rodez as its capital city.
4. Henri Jeanson (1900–1970) was an actor, journalist (for *Paris-Soir*, among other publications), dramatist, librettist, drama critic (for *La Bataille*), film critic (for *Le Canard*), and screenwriter whose film credits included *Pépé le Moko* (1937), *Un Carnet du Bal* (1937), *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), *La Nuit fantastique* (1942), and *Madame Du Barry* (1954).
5. This metaphor is an allusion to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when French aristocrats, especially the ladies, loved to "play peasant." They did so on miniature farms, where the animals were clean and the sheep wore ribbons.

The Last Vacation, or the Style Is the Man Himself

For several dozen people in Paris—novelists, poets, theater and film directors, actors, critics, painters, independent producers, most of whom used to meet in the vicinity of the Odéon, the Rue du Bac, and the Seine (long before the existentialist invasion, when the Deux Magots was still a literary center and people went to the Café de Flore to meet Jean Renoir, Paul Grimault,[1] or Jacques Prévert)—for a few dozen people in the Paris of Arts, Letters, and Friendship, then, there had been the case of Roger Leenhardt ever since the war and even before it. This thin little man, slightly bent forward as if he were carrying the weight of God-knows-what ideal weariness on his shoulders, this little man occupied a discrete, unusual, and exquisite place at the border between French literature and film.

For some of these people, Roger Leenhardt deserves to be called one of the most brilliant critics and aestheticians of talking pictures, a man who has at least ten years' head start on everybody else. For others, Leenhardt is first and foremost a novelist who never completely finished his novels; for still others, he is a curious mixture of poet and businessman who, after getting involved in the intensive growing of lemon trees (in Corsica) and going bankrupt, became a producer of shorts in order to satisfy the subtle complex of associations that tied him to film. I suspect that Roger Leenhardt is a producer in much the same way as he is a critic (i.e., just enough so that he cannot be forced to admit he is a director). We have seen him

prowl around film for ten years, pretend to forget about it, sometimes despise it, and then rejoin it with a single word during one of those wonderful and nonchalant conversations in which Leenhardt toys with ideas like a cat with a mouse.

Some people were wondering whether Leenhardt would ever be able to deal with a "big film," to tackle a major work, which the form of his intelligence has perhaps seemed doomed to do from the start. With Leenhardt, one could even be tempted to say that it would be a pity if this fount of lively ideas condescended to compromise itself by directing a film. In the end I suspect that Leenhardt convinced himself to accept the proposal of his friend, the producer Pierre Gérin, because Leenhardt thought that making a film would be yet another way of putting an idea forward—the idea of creation—and in a way that is hardly less intellectual than his venture with the citrus plantation in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.

If I pay so much attention to Roger Leenhardt's personality before I speak of *The Last Vacation* (1948), this is because his disposition seems in a way more important than the film itself. The reason is that the essence of Leenhardt will forever be contained in his conversation, and his work, however significant it might be, will always be just a byproduct of that conversation. Roger Leenhardt has perhaps given us his masterpieces in a minor key in the commentaries that accompany the shorts he has directed or produced. Do you remember, for instance, his documentary on the wind (*In Pursuit of the Wind*, 1943), in which the tall silhouette of Lanza del Vasto appeared on a sun-scorched and mistral-swept wasteland? I do not even want to talk about the text of his commentary, although the one for *The Birth of Film* (1946)[2] is wonderful; I am thinking only of the diction, tone, and modulation of his voice, which makes Leenhardt the best commentator in French film. The whole of Leenhardt comes out in that intelligent and incisive voice, which the mechanism of the microphone never manages to corrode to the extent that the voice ceases to imitate the movement of the mind itself. Leenhardt is first and foremost a man of the spoken word. Speech is mobile, flexible, and intimate enough to absorb and translate his dialectic without any appreciable waste of energy, and to preserve the vibration in his shadowless diction where light resounds with passion.

Even if he had not made any great films, Roger Leenhardt would be one of the most appealing and irreplaceable personalities in French cinema. He is a kind of "gray eminence" of cinema, one of the few men who, after the generation of people like Louis Delluc and Germaine Dulac,[3] have given French film a conscience. It looked, however, as though Leenhardt's temperament would keep him from venturing too far into the no man's land between creativity and production, from crossing over from the semi-internationality of Saint-Germain-des-Près,[4] where everything is possible at the level of words, to the implacably stupid world of the Champs-Elysées, where everyone is subjected to the ruthless inquisition of success and money. I must also say the following because it is only proper: we have to give Pierre Gérin credit for offering Leenhardt the bridge of his trust and friendship, so that Leenhardt could cross from the left bank of the Seine to the right.[5]

I can admit it now: we were extremely afraid. First, no doubt, because his failure would have saddened us more as a result of our tenderness for the man than our esteem for him, but, more important still, because, like a few others before him,

Leenhardt was going to bear witness to one of the most serious problems of filmic creation. Despite his intellectual familiarity with film, despite his experience as a producer and director of shorts, Leenhardt was entering the cinema without weapons, ignorant of studio techniques. He had practically never directed actors, yet now he was supposed to subdue at once all the monsters from which the union heads, if not the producers themselves, normally protect young, inexperienced directors. Leenhardt was virtually compelled to answer the following question: can an auteur in the film industry go straight to his style—that is, learn enough about technique in a few days to subject it to his will and intention, then make a work that is both beautiful and commercial—without going through the rites of a long technical apprenticeship? We did not expect from Leenhardt a "well-made" film but the work of an auteur, who in a major way would realize on screen something of the world that he carries inside himself. There are other examples of this kind of passage into film, but they are not numerous. Except for the wholly different case of Renoir, who, along with Georges Méliès and Louis Feuillade,[6] is probably the sole Mr. Cinema that France has ever had the privilege of knowing, only Jean Cocteau and André Malraux managed at once to subject cinematic technique to their artistic style. In Hollywood, the recent experience of Orson Welles further proves what technique may gain if it lets itself be violated by style. After this, how could it refuse to submit to one of the most intelligent men in French film?

Leenhardt was prudent enough to create the most difficult problems for himself; the safest way to proceed, under the circumstances, was through the field of greatest difficulty. So Leenhardt wrote his scenario and dialogue (with his brother-in-law, the late Roger Breuil, who was also his close friend) around a thin subject that was highly novelistic and that presented almost insoluble problems for the actors. The initial idea was very simple and beautiful and could have come from a novel by Jean Giraudoux.

It often happens that, at around the age of fifteen or sixteen, a girl has more psychological maturity than a boy; it will take him several years to catch up with her. The arrival of a young Parisian architect, who is in charge of selling the family estate, suddenly makes the sixteen-year-old Juliette aware of her destiny as a woman. She turns away for a while from her cousin of the same age, Jacques, who in his childish jealousy confusedly believes that Juliette is leaving him behind, that she is passing into adulthood and that he must also make his way toward the world of grown-ups, but more slowly and more painfully. His final summer vacation at the estate will teach him how to distinguish between the last slap in the face he got from his mother and the first slap in the face he will get from a woman. But Leenhardt has chosen to link the theme of the end of childhood intimately to the end of a family heritage and with it a certain kind of society: that of the Protestant bourgeoisie, which three generations of painstakingly amassed wealth and thus tremendous financial security have turned into a kind of aristocracy. Around 1930, in the aftermath of the First World War and at the start of the Great Depression, the decline of this bourgeoisie has already begun. The two adventures, that of the children and that of the parents, have a common ground: the estate, which has become too burdensome for its owners to manage and which they must sell to a hotel consortium.

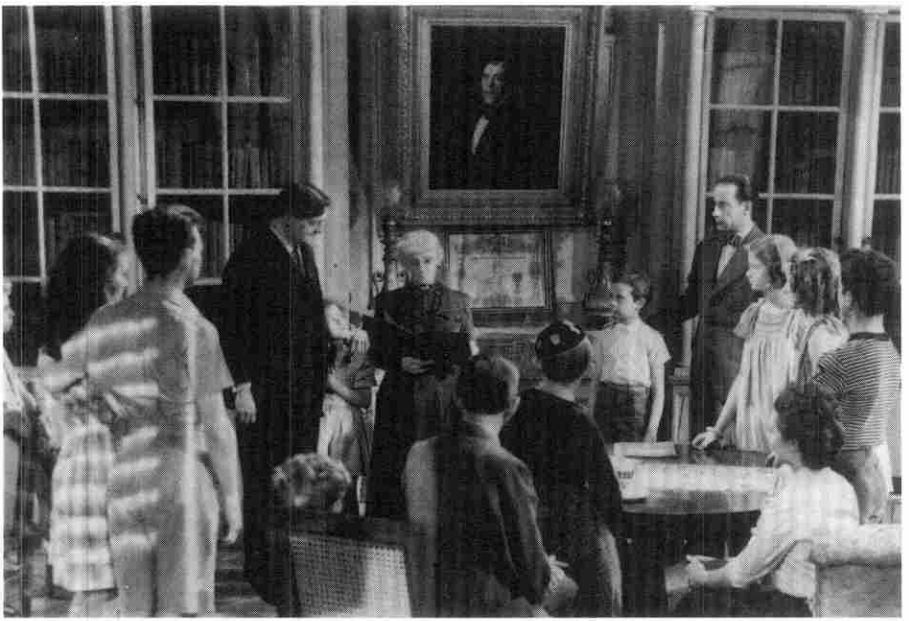

Figure 4. *The Last Vacation* (Roger Leenhardt, 1948) is a masterpiece in a minor key. Its aesthetic nature is essentially novelistic. Courtesy La Cinémathèque Royale, Brussels.

This estate, where Jacques and Juliette will receive their first lesson in love, is also the product of a precise human geography, with its rock gardens, huge lawns, hayfields, bamboo alleys, flowering araucaria trees, blue cedars, grandiflora magnolias, and green oaks, which identify the place as scrubland in the Cévennes of southern France. This estate is the outgrowth of bourgeois propriety, as it can also be seen in twenty other French provinces. It is an enclosed space, an artificial paradise, something as old-fashioned and unusual in the middle of this sunburned country, full of Roman ruins, as the guipure dresses and pearl settings of Aunt Nelly. It is the symbol of three or four bourgeois generations, whose charm and greatness consist in the fact that they created in three-quarters of a century both a lifestyle and a style for their estate. But this marvelous bourgeoisie has become even more anachronistic over the question of the parents' worries than the children's games.

One may wonder here why French film has not exploited more the theme of the "family estate," to which literature owes numerous masterly novels, from Eugène Fromentin's *Dominique* (1863) to Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913).[7] What is even stranger: the bourgeoisie, whose lifestyle and decadence are the subjects of nine-tenths of the great novels from Balzac to Proust, has found little interest among filmmakers. Except for *The Italian Straw Hat* (1927, Réne Clair), *Love Story* (1943, Claude Autant-Lara), and *Devil in the Flesh* (1947, Claude Autant-Lara), the eternal and wonderful *Rules of the Game* (1939, Jean

Renoir) is perhaps the only "bourgeois" film, if indeed it is that. And let us note, incidentally, how difficult Leenhardt has made his task by situating the action of the film between 1925 and 1930. Difficult, but distinctively so and therefore interesting in that, in place of the classical prestige of dress around 1900, he by contrast substituted less-than-becoming costumes so close to our own that they could easily have become incongruous.

The problem of the acting was even more difficult to solve. Fifteen years old is a thankless age in film (whereas it is the age of choice for the novel), because you can no longer count on the animalistic charm of childhood to get you by, yet few older professional actors can be sufficiently natural in the role. In *Devil in the Flesh*, Autant-Lara went to the limit—and succeeded—in asking the twenty-five-year-old Gérard Philippe to play a seventeen-year-old schoolboy. The script of *The Last Vacation* did not allow for such casting, however, and Leenhardt was rewarded for his daring: the young Odile Versois, who makes her screen début, and Michael François, who wears his short pants quite naturally, are both almost perfect. In any event, they are superior to the adult actors, who are largely responsible for the weaknesses of the film. Pierre Dux, in particular, is not at all the slightly weak yet good-natured bon vivant that the script required. Berthe Bovy lacks simplicity, and Christiane Barry does not have enough talent or resources to play the role of the beautiful, divorced cousin. One can reproach Leenhardt as well for the change of tone that occurs at the end of the film. The first two-thirds, which are mostly devoted to the adventures of Jacques and Juliette, are admirably—I almost said "novelistically"—realized. The last third, by contrast, stresses the love affair between Dux and Barry and at times barely manages to avoid a farcical tone. Here perhaps the screenwriter ran out of energy and audacity.

However, no matter how interesting and for the most part new Leenhardt's script might be, it is the style of his mise-en-scène that should command our attention. I am sure that lots of experienced technicians will find the film's mise-en-scène poor, if not downright clumsy. The audience will see the austerity of the film's technical effects, which it will perhaps also consider, more or less consciously, a defect. The reason is that people no longer know, or do not quite know yet, what style is in film. In fact, for every one hundred films, at least ninety-eight have the exact same editing technique, despite some illusory "stylistic" devices. A film by Christian-Jaque or even by Julien Duvivier cannot be recognized by its style, but only by the more or less frequent use it makes of certain effects that are perfectly classical and on which these directors have simply worked some improvements of their own.

Conversely, Renoir's films, in which the cutting often goes against all logic and is done without any regard for cinematic grammar, are style itself. Leenhardt is not the sort of man who despises form or even rules, and I do not mean to say that there is not a certain awkwardness discernible in the solution he has found to this or that problem of editing. A little more experience would probably have enabled him to solve such problems better, but for the most part he has discovered the style and technique appropriate to his themes. His filmic sentence has a syntax and a rhythm that are uniquely personal, but his originality by no means signifies a lack of clarity. And although he has a wonderful feel for the concrete continuity of

a scene, Leenhardt knows how to play up the significance of the distinctive parts that form its whole.

As a novelist, Leenhardt would have been a moralist. The writing here, in a way and through its own means, recovers the syntax of lucidity that characterizes the whole of French novelistic classicism, from Mme Marie-Madeleine de la Fayette's *Princess of Clèves* (1678) to Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942). Considered as description or documentary, the screenplay of *The Last Vacation* would indeed seem primitive. But, above all, the film depicts a way of thinking, the movement of a mind, in which the most striking contradictions of Leenhardt's personality find their exact aesthetic solution. If one had to look for plastic instead of literary reference points, I would compare the best scenes of *The Last Vacation* with those engravings where the careful observation of detail derives its meaning and value precisely from the linear clarity of the overall design. Although partly influenced by Renoir (Leenhardt's camera, like Renoir's, manages never to kill a scene as if it were a vivisectionist's scalpel), Leenhardt differs from him in that he never completely gives up on trying to understand an event and to judge it. This auteur's hereditary Protestantism is not only discernible in the subject matter of his script and in the Cévennes landscape where the action takes place, it also informs the movement and cutting of the camera, imposing a morality that we do not find in Renoir (which, after all, is why we find Renoir so charming).

I fear that this novel work, in which neither the script nor the mise-en-scène resorts to spectacular effects and artificial devices, and which was made with little money, will not get the attention it deserves. In any event, that is what we are forced to conclude since, with persistent coldness, selection committees have omitted *The Last Vacation* from all the international competitions of 1947. The reason is that its aesthetic nature is essentially novelistic. Leenhardt has made into a film the novel that he could have written. However paradoxical it might seem, the opinion of the public and even of the critics would have been much more favorable if *The Last Vacation* had been an adaptation. Since the movie could then be easily integrated into a literary tradition, almost without our realizing it, we would no longer notice how extraordinary and profoundly original its filmic essence is.

André Malraux makes us feel the same ambivalence about a filmic work that could also be literary. But make no mistake: *Man's Hope* (1939, Malraux)[8] is the very opposite of an adaptation, despite the fact that it is based on Malraux's own, radically different kind of novel. The film and the book are the refraction in two different artistic media of the same creative impulse, which places them on the same aesthetic level. Even if Malraux had not written *Man's Hope* (which actually was completed after the film), we would nevertheless have felt that what we were seeing could have been a novel. *The Last Vacation* gives us the exact same feeling. Indeed, everything that has really counted in the last ten years of movie production throughout the world, from *The Rules of the Game* to *Citizen Kane* (1941, Orson Welles) to *Paisan* (1946, Roberto Rossellini), has, in fact, been a novel (or short story) that chose instead to become a film. And does not the language of film

owe its greatest progress during the same period precisely to these aesthetic mutations (which, I repeat, are not adaptations or transpositions)?

Notes

This article was first published in *Revue du Cinéma* (July 1948), then reprinted in volume 3 (*Cinéma et sociologie*) of Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958–1962), 33–41. It is translated here, for the first time, with the permission of Janine Bazin. All notes have been provided by the translator/editor.

1. Paul Gritnault (b. 1905) began by making entertainment cartoons for the screen, at first short and later feature length. His work is traditional in style but stands out for its intelligence and delicate lyricism. His *Le Petit Soldat* won first prize at Venice in 1948. Grimault's influence on the development of French animation has been considerable.
2. Released in English as two films: *Animated Cartoons* and *Biography of the Motion Picture Camera.*
3. Louis Delluc (1890–1924) was one of the key figures in the renewal of French cinema after the collapse of the industry's world dominance in the years before World War I. Though in no sense the leader of a unified movement or faction, Delluc had considerable importance as both a critic and a filmmaker. His impact was crucial during the years after 1919, though he died in 1924, before the full flowering of the French film renaissance to which he had made such a great contribution.

   Filmmaking was only one phase of the career of Germaine Dulac (1882–1942); she was also a theorist and promoter of avant-garde film and an organizer of the French film unions and the ciné-club movement. Her role in French film history has been compared to that of Maya Deren in the United States, three decades later.
4. All the places Bazin mentions in the first paragraph are located in Saint-Gemain-des-Près, supposedly the artists' neighborhood of Paris.
5. Saint-Gemain-des-Près is on the left bank of the Seine, and the Champs-Elysées is on the right bank.
6. Louis Feuillade (1873–1925) was one of the most solid and dependable talents in French cinema during the teens. He succeeded Alice Guy as head of production at Gaumont in 1906 and worked virtually without a break—aside from a period of war service—until his death in 1925, producing some eight hundred films of every conceivable kind: comedies and contemporary melodramas, biblical epics and historical dramas, and sketches and series with numerous episodes, adding up to many hours of running time. It was their supreme lack of logic, their disregard of hallowed bourgeois values—so appropriate at a time when the old social order of Europe was crumbling under the impact of World War I—that led surrealists such as André Breton and Louis Aragon to hail the crime-melodrama series *Fantômas* (1913–1914) and *Les Vampires* (1915–1916). Most of Feuillade's subsequent advocates have similarly celebrated these films' anarchistic poetry.
7. *Le Grand Meaulnes* was filmed in 1967 as *The Wanderer* (Jean-Gabriel Albicocco).
8. The only feature directed by the esteemed French writer Malraux, based on his novel *L'Espoir* (this is also the title of the film in French; an alternate French title is *Sierra de Teruel*). In it, a small group of ill-equipped Republican fighters in the Spanish Civil War attempt to blow up a bridge to prevent arms and supplies from reaching Franco's troops.

Copyright of Cinema Journal is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.